

## RANCHING IN SOUTHERN MONO COUNTY

Among the many reasons that people have come to southern Mono County is for ranching and agriculture. Evidence suggests that the earliest residents, the Owens Valley Paiutes, practised irrigation on Bishop Creek in northern Inyo County. "They built a dam on Bishop Creek and diverted water several miles through large earthen canals to two immense plots, one measuring about two square miles and the other approximately four by to one and one-and-a-half miles."<sup>1</sup> Crops include yellow nut grass, wild hycinth, and tubers. The Owens Valley Paiutes, the group that lived in southern Mono County, constructed their irrigation system around A. D. 1000. They used a wooden tool, or digging stick, to harvest plants and till the soil. Their irrigation technique had an additional benefit for the Paiute. They could gather fish left dry in the diverted creek or canal. Some evidence suggests that this dry-creek fishing practise preceded and prompted the development of irrigation by the Paiute. The only other California Indian group to have practised irrigation lived on the lower Colórado River, although their knowledge seems to have come from central Arizona, while the Owens Valley Paiute developed their techniques independently.

William H. Brewer of the California State Geological Survey reached the northern end of the Owens Valley in July 1864. While in either northern Inyo or southern Mono County Brewer remarked on the types of ranching taking place there. He stated that "there is a sort of basin where there are nine or ten square miles of the best grasses I have seen in the state. Three or four settlers have come in this year with cattle and horses, but there is feed for ten times as many. One has started a garden, to sell vegetables in Owensville, ten or fifteen miles distant, and Aurora, sixty-five miles distant. He came into camp and wanted to sell vegetables. I bought some, also four pounds of butter--all luxuries. Perhaps you would be interested to know what prices are asked for vegetables so far from any market. They are: green peas in a pod, ten cents a pound; turnips, eight cents a pound; cucumbers, twenty-five cents a dozen; radishes, thirteen cents a dozen; butter, seventy-five cents a pound, in gold--now worth three times its face in greenbacks. But they are very acceptable notwithstanding their price."<sup>2</sup> This location was most likely in Round Valley but Brewer's description gives an idea about the possibilities for southern Mono County.

The most important type of ranching in southern Mono County was sheep or cattle ranching, especially in the meadows just east of the Sierra Nevada. The cooler temperatures of higher elevation, plentiful water and forage, and open lands made this an attractive area for rancher to pasture their cattle. Brewer noted that by the 1860s people had driven cattle into the eastern Sierra. He wrote that "tens of thousands of starving cattle of the state have been driven in here (the eastern Sierra) this year (1864), and there is feed for twice as many more."<sup>3</sup>

One group that drove cattle through southern Mono County in the 1860s was the McGee family. In 1861 they "drove cattle over Walker Pass heading for Monoville near Mono Lake and Aurora. They did not see any white men until they reached Adobe Meadows."<sup>4</sup> Many other cattlemen also drove their stock into the Owens Valley. For example, Henry Van Sickle, an entrepreneur from Genoa, brought a herd south from Nevada to near present-day Laws.<sup>5</sup> Trouble arose eventually between the Owens Valley Paiute and the cattle herders. The "Owens Valley Indian War" occurred in the early 1860s when starving Indians began killing cattle for their own survival.



The McGee family continued to be important cattle ranchers into the twentieth century. By the late 1860s they used most of Long Valley as summer range land for their cattle. In the winters they took the cattle to Round Valley and Owens Valley. Farming was not extensive in Long Valley during the 1870s and 1880s so the McGee family, and later the Summers family, could let their cattle roam throughout the Long Valley.<sup>6</sup>

In the Lake District mining area, prominent from 1877 to 1881, fresh food was in short supply. Round Valley farmers supplied much of the groceries with many fruits and vegetables coming over longer distances by wagon. The Lake Mining Review of August 16, 1879, noted that "(e)very day during the past week teams loaded down to the guard with eggs, butter, fruit, adn vegetables, ect., have flocked in from Bishop Creek, Big Pine and Round Valley."<sup>7</sup> The same newspaper from September 13, 1879 aded that "vegetables of all kinds come to our market daiy. Potatoes have come down in price from 7 cents to 3 cents per pound."<sup>8</sup> Other supplies came from as far away as Carson City, Sacramento, and San Francisco.<sup>9</sup>

Another family that settled in the Long Valley for ranching was the Summers. One author noted that, "(a)t Long Valley, Mr. Summers and Mr. McGee had pasture land for their cattle...Summers and McGee had fenced their summer range in Long Valley and had a one room cabin for their own use."<sup>10</sup> They left the cabin unlocked during the winters and stocked with provisions so that winter traveler would have a place to stay. The two families pastured cattle and sheep in the Long Valley through the 1900s.

The patriarch of the McGee family, Alney L. McGee, also worked as the cattle foreman for two prominent Nevada cattle ranchers, C. B. Rawson and Thomas B. Rickey. Rickey had herds of thousands of heads of cattle throughout Nevada and eastern California. The Mammoth Museum has a 1902 picture, probably taken near Independence, with a label reading "5464 head of Rickey Cattle." McGee sold his land and animals to Rawson and Rickey in the late 1880s in anticipation of setting off for the Alaskan gold rush, but McGee returned to Bishop the same year he left, 1889, having never made it to Alaska.<sup>11</sup>

When Rickey began selling parts of his land and herds in the early 1900s, Charles Summers bought portions in Long Valley.<sup>12</sup> Charles Summers and his brother John also bought C. B. Rawson's holdings, which extended from Laurel Creek to Casa Diablo Hot Springs.<sup>13</sup> "Charles Summers became a broker or agent more or less for the remaining cattle men in the valley. He gathered cattle raised by himself and others and shipped them by rail to various markets, mainly San Francisco."<sup>14</sup> Prior to the LA DWP, the Summers family accumulated the largest land holdings in southern Mono County.

The 1908 promotional guide for Mono County provides some information about the ranching industry in the county. In 1908 the county had 170 ranches.<sup>15</sup> For the entire county the guide stated that grazing and stockraising were "carried on on a large scale, while agriculture and horticulture are given considerable attention."<sup>16</sup> The county had vast herds of cattle and thousands of sheep that range in the valley and mountain pastures. In one summer up to 200,000 sheep were ranged in the county and in mild winters they could stay in the county all year.<sup>17</sup>

The guide described southern Mono County prospects for agriculture in glorious terms. Its "valleys are well watered; the soil is rich and fertile, and highly productive."<sup>18</sup> Also "hay and stock ranches take up immense acreage, the product being shipped to Nevada and California markets, the Nevada and California Railroad offering splendid facilities for shipping, and being



within easy access for most of the producing lands of this section."<sup>19</sup> Conditions, although overly idealized by the guide, would soon change to make farming and ranching more difficult.<sup>20</sup>

The Arcularius family, headed by Frank Arcularius, began around the turn-of-the-century to start ranching and raising sheep and cattle in Round Valley. They started their sheep business by buying or picking up sick and dying sheep in the desert and then hauling them back to Round Valley. In the 1920s they bought land from William Symon in northern Long Valley, where they ranged their cattle and sheep.<sup>21</sup>

By the mid-1920s three dairies had been started near present Mammoth Lakes. Beginning in the 1910s Alvin Bodle operated a dairy farm near Windy Flats, or the area near the present day Snow Creek golf course.<sup>22</sup> In the early 1920s A. W. Wonacott moved his Holstein cows up from Bishop to Laurel Creek, where he pastured his cows on the Summers family land. In exchange for use of the land, Wonacott tended to the Summers's cows. Wonacott delivered milk to surrounding campgrounds and later moved his farm down to Hot Creek. From there he sold milk to the LA DWP workers building Lake Crowley.<sup>23</sup> The Summers family operated the third dairy. Because they had electric power produced by the knight wheel, the Summers had a creamery. The creamery had a separator and ice cream machine.<sup>24</sup> The 1908 guide had noted that excellent pasturage existed for dairy farmers but little attention had been paid to it.<sup>25</sup>

The routes to take cattle and sheep taken Long and Owens Valleys originally followed old Indian trails. "These early cattle trails were known by various names such as Rickey Trail, Dry Trail, Casa Diablo Trail, and Sherwin Hill Trail."<sup>26</sup> Area pack outfits still follow parts of these trails to Mammoth to Independence when they bring their horses north in the spring. Stock trails did not just come from the south. Stockmen from the San Joaquin Valley drove their herds to summer pasturage over the Old French Trail, or Mammoth Pass Trail as it later became known.<sup>27</sup> One of the long-time Owens Valley ranchers, Roy Willis, writing in 1946 noted that "(i)n the early days, the 1920s and before, there were thousands of head of sheep driven through the (Owens) (V)alley to summer range in the high mountains--in Long Valley, McGee Creek, Hot Creek, Mammoth Creek, and the headwaters of the Mono Basin."<sup>28</sup>

One group that has been involved with sheep herding in the eastern Sierra are the Basque people. As early as the 1870s and 1880s the Basque were involved with sheep herding in the Owens Valley. The Lake Mining Review of August 16, 1879 included an article entitled "Careless Handling of Giant Caps" about a possible French Basque shepherd. Jules Colliard, from Bakersfield, blew off his fingers when handling a powder cap while herding sheep near Lake Minnie District. In 1888 Alney McGee sold 1,400 sheep to people he called "Frenchmen." These Frenchmen very likely were French Basque. The Basque worked as shepherds in the Wasatch Range, the area around Lake Tahoe, and in the southern San Joaquin Valley. This group from the Bakersfield area took sheep in the spring into the high Sierra, including southern Mono County in their search for meadows and pasture. Sheep driven from Bakersfield crossed either Tehachapi or Walker Pass with each group having two herders.<sup>29</sup> Aspen tree carving, a sign of Basque occupations, have been found on Hilton Creek near the town of Lake Crowley. One carving is of a Basque name and dated 1936.<sup>30</sup>

Two difficulties arose after 1900 that began to slowly affect the ranging of cattle and sheep. The 1908 guide stated that stock grazing in the county had begun to become less of an industry within recent years. The federal government had started limiting the number of sheep



allowed grazing privileges after the establishment of forest reserves, including the Mono National Forest which later became part of the Inyo National Forest, around the turn-of-the-century.\31

The other difficulty for cattle and sheep ranching began with the LA DWP buying land in the Owens Valley and later in the Long Valley. In many place where the LA DWP bought land they cut off or diverted the streams that had watered pasture land. In Round Valley they cut off and piped two smaller creeks into Bishop Creek making the land not has usable for range cattle.\32 One Owens Valley rancher said that if "I hadn't had to sell I would have been in business yet."\33 Many farmers and ranchers left the county after selling out to the LA DWP.\34 Southern Mono County lost much of its best meadow lands in 1941 when Los Angeles filled Lake Crowley, an area once ocupied by Tom Rickey's ranch.

Today Mono County has about 110 ranches, of all different sizes.\35 Now ranching mainly consists of grazing on City of Los Angeles land. As cattle ranching increased in profitablility in the 1940s and 1950s the cattle business in southern Mono County began to revive and change. The methods of transportant, for example, are much different today than in yesteryear. Taking cattle and sheep to the higher elevations of Mono County by truck is much more efficient and saves days a number of days needed for a cattle drive. Today the sheep that come from Bakersfield can be brought to southern Mono County by truck in one day what it once took a month to do.\36



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Norris Hundley, jr., The Great Thirst: Californians and Water, 1770s-1990s (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 17.
- 2 William H. Brewer, Up and Down California in 1860-1864, 3rd ed, ed. Francis P. Fraquhar (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 538-39.
- 3 Brewer, Up and Down California, 535.
- 4 George L. Garrigues, Alney McGee, Pioneer-Indian Fighter-Cattleman: A Sketch of the McGee Families in Ameica, 1716-1980 (Bishop: By Author, 1993), 11.
- 5 Garrigues, Alney McGee, 12.
- 6 Margaret Calhoun, Pioneers of the Mono Basin (Lee Vining: Artemisia Press, 1984), 40.
- 7 Lake Mining Review, August 16, 1879.
- 8 Lake Mining Review, September 13, 1879.
- 9 Gary Caldwell, Mammoth Gold: Ghost Towns of the Lake District (Palo Alto: Geny Smith Books, 1990), 80-84.
- 10 Calhoun, Pioneers of the Mono Basin, 40.
- 11 Garrigues, Alney McGee, 23-24.
- 12 Vern Summers Oral History, SMHS Oral History Collection.
- 13 Adele Reed, Old Mammoth (Palo Alto: Genny Smith Press, 1982), 54.
- 14 Garrigues, Alney McGee, 28-29.
- 15 F. W. McIntosh, Mono County, California: The Land of Promise for the Man of Industry (Bridgeport: F. W. McIntosh, 1908), 12.
- 16 McIntosh, Mono County, 20.
- 17 McIntosh, Mono County, 45.
- 18 McIntosh, Mono County, 93.



- 19 McIntosh, Mono County, 93.
- 20 One of the conditions was a lack of water. The Inyo Register in March 1899 indicated the importance of water for Owens Valley ranches. W. A. Chalfant, the Register's editor, wrote that "it would seem there are many ranches between Owens Lake and the Mono (County) Line where the wind mill and pump would be of use. If they did not solve the question of water shortage, they would relieve the situation to some extent." The pumps would have filled private reservoirs. (Inyo Register, March 16, 1899)
- 21 Genvieve Arcularius Clement Oral History, SMHS Oral History Collection.
- 22 Vern Summer Oral History.
- 23 Reed, Old Mammoth, 90-91.
- 24 Vern Summers Oral History.
- 25 McIntosh, Mono County, 45.
- 26 Marye Roeser, "The Long Trail," The Album: Times and Tales of Inyo-Mono (October 1991), 31.
- 27 Roeser, "The Long Trail," 40.
- 28 Roy D. Willis, "Ranching in the Owens Valley," The Album 1993: Times and Tales of Inyo-Mono (1993), 112.
- 29 Willis, "Ranching in the Owens Valley," 112.
- 30 The information about the Hilton Creek tree carving comes from two visitors to the Mammoth Museum in June 1994. The couple had a tree carving on their property.
- 31 McIntosh, Mono County, 45.
- 32 Willis, "Ranching in the Owens Valley," 108.
- 33 Willis, "Ranching in the Owens Valley," 109/
- 34 Hundley, The Great Thrist, 162.
- 35 Genny Smith, Mammoth Lakes Sierra: A Handbook for Roadside and Trail, 6th ed. (Mammoth Lakes: Genny Smith Books, 1993), 206.
- 36 Smith, Mammoth Lakes Sierra, 206.